

# “METAPHORS WE LEARNT BY”: CULTURAL TRADITIONS AND METAPHORICAL PATTERNS IN THE OLD ENGLISH VOCABULARY OF “KNOWLEDGE”

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## ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the diachronic analysis of the development, form and function of a set of metaphors found in Old English language, literature, society and iconography. More exactly I will focus here on the role of these metaphors as a pervasive factor of diachronic change, with special attention to the earliest stages of development of the English language. Given the Mind-as-Body Metaphor as a background, I will try to reconstruct here some basic connections between the earlier concrete and historically later meanings of perception verbs in Old English. In doing so, I intend to reconstruct some of the semantic connections drawn by Anglo-Saxon speakers and “reflect the culturally important features of objects, institutions and activities in the society in which language operated” (Lyons 43).

KEY WORDS: Cognitive metaphor, Old English, lexicon, semantic change, protogermanic.

## ABSTRACT

Este artículo propone un análisis diacrónico del desarrollo, forma y función de un grupo de metáforas recurrentes en la lengua, literatura, sociedad e iconografía anglo-sajonas. Más exactamente, nos centraremos en el papel de estas metáforas como factores de cambio diacrónico, con atención especial a los estadios más antiguos del desarrollo de la lengua inglesa. Tomando como punto de partida la metáfora ‘la mente es cuerpo’, reconstruimos algunas conexiones básicas entre los significados concretos primarios y los significados abstractos posteriores en el campo léxico de la percepción física en inglés antiguo. Queremos así reconstruir algunas de las conexiones semánticas establecidas por los hablantes anglo-sajones y “reflejar las características culturalmente importantes de los objetos, instituciones y actividades de la sociedad en que este idioma se usó” (Lyons 43)

PALABRAS CLAVE: metáfora cognitiva, inglés antiguo, léxico, cambio semántico, protogermánico.

## 1. THE MIND-AS-BODY METAPHOR: AN OVERVIEW

In this paper I am going to focus on the diachronic analysis of the development, form and function of a set of metaphors found in Old English language,



literature, society and iconography. My research is heavily based on the descriptions of the so-called Mind-as-Body Metaphor provided by Sweetser, Indurkha. More exactly, following Kövecses, I will focus here on the role of this general metaphor as a pervasive factor of diachronic change, with special attention to the earliest stages of development of the English language.

The Mind-as-Body Metaphor was first described by Kurath, who noted that Indo-European words for knowledge and emotions are frequently derived from words referring to physical actions or sensations accompanying the relevant abstract actions of knowing or feeling (e.g. “**anger** is *heat*”; see Gevaert and Vázquez González for some Old English examples), or the bodily organs affected by those physical reactions (e.g. “the **heart** is the seat of *excitement*, *passion* and other strong emotions that affect cardiac palpitation”; Fabiszak). However, there also exist frequent apparently unmotivated and random mappings for which no psychosomatic motivations can be found, and hence are more subject to diachronic and cross-cultural variation.

For instance, **love** was seen as a function of the *liver* by Proto-Germanic speakers, so that the PGmc weak verb \**luŕsijan* “to love” was lexicalised on the basis of the noun \**liŕ* “liver.” This connection between love and the liver, which can also be seen in Greek literature, survived well into the Middle Ages (e.g. *The livere makth him forto love* [1390 Gower *Conf.* III. 100]), when **love** came to be conceived of as a function of the *heart*.

The Mind-as-Body Metaphor is the result of the global conceptualization of one whole area of experience (i.e. the internal self and internal sensations) in terms of another (i.e. physical perception), so that even if the link-up between our vocabularies of mind and body may have some psychosomatic roots (especially in the most prototypical cases), it is essentially metaphorical in nature. Broadly speaking, the Mind-as-Body Metaphor implies a tightly structured mapping of the vocabulary of physical perception into the vocabulary of knowledge and feeling. When we refer to the central Mind-as-Body Metaphor, we are using a mnemonic set of ontological correspondences that characterise a mapping, namely:

1. The **body** corresponds to a *container* of ideas and emotions
2. **Ideas** are *physical objects* that can be obtained, retained, exchanged or lost.
3. **Sensory organs** are *active parts* in the process of reception, understanding, evaluation and exchange of ideas.
4. **Feelings** and **emotions** are *secretions* produced by the relevant body organ.

Given the Mind-as-Body Metaphor as a background, I will try to reconstruct here some basic connections between the earlier concrete and historically later meanings of perception verbs in Old English. In doing so, I intend to reconstruct some of the semantic connections drawn by Anglo-Saxon speakers and “reflect the culturally important features of objects, institutions and activities in the society in which language operated” (Lyons 43).



## 2. KNOWLEDGE IS VISION

The first sense I will make reference to is *VISION*, which is our primary source of objective data about the world. According to Faber and Mairal (160), our prototypical way of perceiving is with our eyes (over 75% of our information about the world is perceived visually), which explains why most verbs of physical perception have to do with vision rather than hearing, smelling, touching or tasting. Moreover, vision gives us data from a distance and is identical for different people, so that our visual perceptions are objective (Sweetser 39).

Following the general correspondence between ideas and objects described above, vision is patterned as physical touching, manipulation and control in Old English. This link is clearly expressed by the PrGmc strong verb *\*sehwa-* “to see” (> OE *sēon*), derived from PIE *\*seku-* “to follow,” or by OE *behealdan* “to catch sight for,” which is a metaphorical extension of PGmc *\*haldán* “to hold.”

- (1) *Ic seah wundorlice wiht* (“I saw a wonderful creature” [Rid 87: 000100 (1)]).
- (2) *þæt englas hie georne beheoldan of þam dage...* (“That the angels looked eagerly upon them until the day...” [HomU 18 (BlHom 1): 005900 (137)]).

As a consequence of a second process of semantic change, which implied a general semantic extension from visual perception to cognition, OE *sēon 1* “to see” becomes OE *sēon 2* “to imagine, predict,” whereas OE *behealdan 1* “to catch sight of” becomes OE *behealdan 2* “to see something mentally, to consider,” which is one of the most common verbs of mental perception in the vocabulary of the Anglo-Saxons:

- (3) *God... bihald to gebede minum* (“God... behold my prayers” [PsGIA (Kuhn): 088800 (60.1)]).

Due to this general change, particular types of knowledge and cognition were expressed as particular types of vision in Old English. This is the case of intellectual knowledge, expressed through OE *witan* “to see > to learn from experience.” This OE verb, etymologically related to L *video* “to see” refers to knowledge as a result of personal experience, as in the case of political advisors (the so-called *witan* “wisemen”), historians and councillors.

- (4) *Frunan maran þinges þonne ænges mannes gemet wære her on eorðan, þæt hit witan mihte* (“He asked further about that thing the only man that he had met on earth who may know it” [HomsS 46 (BlHom 11): 001000 (24)]).

A second type of knowledge, acquired through revelation, is expressed through the OE weak verb *scēawian* “to look at > to see spiritually,” as in the case of prophets, priests and poets. In its primary sense, OE *scēawian* was used to refer to the capacity to see things that are difficult to observe by other people, either because they are hidden or because they cannot be easily interpreted (as in (5)).



- (5) *Episcopus is grecisc nama þæt is on leden speculator & on englisc sceawere* (“*Episcopus* is a Greek name that is in Latin *speculator* and in English *sceawere*” [ÆA Bus Mor: 012100 (254)]).

Spiritual vision is thus conceived of as a revelation of another level of reality, which was not easily observable by normal people (Sweetser 40).

### 3. LEARNING IS HEARING

I will now refer to hearing, which is considered our major means of intellectual and emotional influence on each other. One of the most productive semantic sources of hearing-verbs is to be found in the semantic field of deferential conduct, as in PIE \**klei-* “to bow” (L *inclino* “to take a bow”) > OE *hlystan* “to listen attentively.”

- (6) *Hlystað, hwæt ic secge* (“Listen what I say” [WPol 2.1.1. (Jost): 006100 (56)]).

The opposite direction is also possible, so that OE *hīeran 1* “to hear” became *hīeran 2* “to obey”:

- (7) *Ðæt Israhelisce folc... hyrdon Gode & Moyses his ðeowe* (“The Israelites obeyed God and Moses his servant” [Exod: 031000 (14.31)]).

Besides these links between hearing and obeying, described by Sweetser (42) as a candidate for semantic universality, there existed in Old English a very strong semantic connection between verbs of hearing and verbs of learning by reading. The link between both types of action becomes visible from the PrGmc predicate of verbal communication *rædan* “to give/take a counsel,” which became OE *rædan* “to read.”

- (8) *Hwæt... ge næfre reordun in gewritum* (“What...you never read in the books” [MtGl (Ru): 071500 (21.42)]).

The action of reading was thus patterned as an act of interpersonal communication, as a dialogue between author and his readers, as shown by the preference for collective *viva voce* reading in most Anglo-Saxon monastic houses (Carruthers 169-170). Moreover, the mapping READING A TEXT IS LISTENING TO ITS AUTHOR’S VOICE, which is not found in other Germanic languages, implies that written texts and inscriptions had the ability to speak out to their readers, which justifies the Anglo-Saxon fashion of personifying inanimate objects in order to make them speak about themselves. This is the case of, for example, the Alfred jewel, which bears the following inscription:

- (9) *Ælfred mec heht gevyrcean* (“Alfred had me made” [Inscr 4 (Ok 4): 000100 (1)]).

A similar example can be found in the famous Ruthwell Cross, a monumental stone cross carved with a runic version of the Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood*. The monument, raised by the beginning of the 8th century., narrates in the first person the story of the crucifixion from the perspective of the cross.

- (10) //Ic riicnæ kyningc heafunæs blafard hælda ic ni dorstæ Bismærædu unget men ba ætgadre ic was miþ blode bistemid <Bi>// (“I held high the great King, heaven’s Lord. I dare not bend. Men mocked us both together. I was slick with blood sprung from the Man’s side...” [RuneRuthwellA: [000300 (2-3)]).

#### 4. THINKING IS TOUCHING

Differently to seeing and hearing, touching requires actual physical contact with the sensed object, which implies a high degree of subjectivity. Moreover, touching and physical contact can be dangerous and socially inappropriate, limiting enormously the number of objects that can be sensed by touching. Finally, tactile sensations (such as pain or pleasure) have a clear influence on our emotional states. The PIE verb of touching \**tang-* (L *tangere* “to touch”) underwent a deep series of semantic changes in Germanic, so that it came to express “mental touching, thinking, remembering” in OE *þencan*.

- (11) *And ic þine soðfastnysse symble þence* (“And I always think of your sincerity” [PPs: [122400 (118.117)]).

However, the pervasiveness of the link between touching and thinking is best preserved in the so-called SEAL-IN-WAX METAPHOR (Draaisma 24-27), according to which the mind is conceived as a block of wax upon whose surface ideas are stamped as seals. Within this cultural tradition, which goes back to Homer (Black 219-243), memory, meditation and expectation are conceived of as manipulation of objects (i.e. tactile sensations stamped on the mind’s surface) from the past, from the present or from the future, respectively (e.g. OE *bringan on gemynde*, *habban on gemynde*, *lettan on gemynde*).

Besides this mental metaphor, many OE verbs of touching came to express general physical perception. This is the case of OE *fēlan* “to touch” > “to touch, hear, smell or taste’.

- (12) *Felep sona mines gemotes* (“They feel (by hearing) soon my speech” [Rid 25: [000400 (9)]).

However, the Romance metaphor “to touch” > “to feel physically” > “to feel mentally” is not used in English until 1300 (e.g. ME *feel*), so that it can be considered a semantic borrowing from French.



## 5. PARTIAL KNOWLEDGE IS TASTING

I will refer now to taste, which undoubtedly is the most subjective sense. The number of gustative sensations is practically limited to four (sweet, sour, salty and bitter), so that the type of knowledge about an object we can perceive through tasting is necessarily partial. For that reason, tasting verbs metaphorise as partial knowledge and, in a later stage, as need of complementary knowledge.

Given the basic mapping PARTIAL KNOWLEDGE IS TASTING, the OE verb of tasting *gefandian* “to taste” came to express different situations characterized by the necessity of further knowledge, such as “to test,” “to judge” or “to tempt.” Taste is related to eating, so that metaphors of perception that use digestive activities will be frequently used, especially in Middle English. According to the RUMINATION METAPHOR, the mind is conceived of as a stomach that requires a healthy diet. For example, Chaucer includes in his *Summoner’s Tale* many examples of foods and drinks that were considered particularly harmful for the mind: fatty meats, strong wine, vinegar, beans, garlic, onion, leek, etc. Portions of knowledge are paralleled to portions of food. Digestion and rumination were considered a basic functional model for the activities of meditation and verse composition; this is clearly the case in Bede’s account of poet Cædmon, who ruminated (OE *eodorcende*) by night (the optimal time for digestion) what he had learnt by hearing during the day, changing it into verse.

- (13) *Onð he eal, þa he in gebyrnese geleornian mehte, mid hine gemyndgade; & swa swa clæne neten eodorcende in þæt sweteste leoð gehwerfde* (“And he all that he could retain by hearing with his mind, cleanly turned into such sweet verse through rumination” [Bede 4: [057300 (25.346.1)]]).

Cædmon’s profession (i.e. a cowherd) perfectly suits his ruminative activities, recalling the ancient link between poets and ruminative animals found in many other cultures (West; Wehlau; Pizarro). Through the influx of French (e.g. *Ofr goût*), a further semantic change from taste into personal likes and dislikes in different domains (such as clothing, music, food, friends) will affect this set of English verbs, especially after the end of the 15th century.

## 6. RECOGNISING IS SMELLING

Smelling is characterised by its capacity to transmit important genetic, psychological and behavioural information about the individual, radical differences in odour production contributing to racial prejudice. It is obvious that smells played a decisive role in the earliest stages of human evolution, as they do in most animal species (Kohl and Francoeur). However, it is hard to determine the exact historical moment when humans opted for new ways of personal and social intercourse, eliminating both any traces of personal odours and their capacity to consciously interpret them. Etymologies indicate two clear links between words for smell and interpersonal relationships:



1. PIE *\*bhra-* > OE *bræþan* “to emit a good smell” (L *fragare*): words for good smells are linked with different types of kinship bonds, such as OE *broþor* “brother” (L *frater*) and OE *bryd* “bride.”
2. PIE *\*pu-* > OE *fulian* “to stink” (L *pus*): words for foul smells are linked with words for enmity and hostility, such as OE *fāh* “foe,” *fēond* “fiend” and *ficol* “treacherous.”

These semantic links are probably indicating that odours continued to be used as a means of racial differentiation, either consciously or unconsciously, by Germanic times. Finally, the semantic change “to smell” > “to detect (the bad qualities of something)” is considered a French borrowing, so that L *sentire* “to feel” > OFr *sentir* “to perceive by smelling” > ME *scent* “to find out instinctively, to detect.”

## 7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of these routes of change allows a transparent, structured and coherent view of the basic principles underlying the semantic evolution of English, so that words originally used to refer to concrete objects and actions (such as parts of the body, manipulation of objects, digestion, etc) will come to express abstract entities (such as knowledge and understanding). These changes are the result not only of the natural semantic evolution of English, but also of its intimate relation with French after the Norman Conquest, which allowed the introduction of a wide number of metaphors of knowledge and feeling that are unknown to other Germanic languages. A knowledge of this metaphorical system will permit a more complete view not only of the linguistic system known as Old English, but also of different facets of Anglo-Saxon life, mentality and society, extending our experience in time in order to “gain an insight into a way of thinking and feeling and viewing the world that is different from ours” (Jackson 161).

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